

Dedicated to the cause - documentary celebrates activist Tillie Olsen

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Tillie Olsen was 91 when she collapsed in Omaha, Neb., where the venerable writer and activist had grown up in a working-class, Russian-Jewish socialist family, and where she'd returned in 2003 to receive an award from the high school she'd quit to take a factory job. In the hospital, she gazed in wonder at the EKG of her pulsing heart.

"I certainly didn't want it to go on strike for better working conditions," joked Olsen, who'd been arrested during the historic 1934 San Francisco waterfront strike and over the ensuing decades and until her death at 94 on New Year's Day 2007, was deeply engaged in the labor, anti-war and feminist movements. "It was a real thrill to see my own heart in action."

Hearing that line, filmmaker Ann Hershey, who was with Olsen at the time, knew she'd found the title and opening sequence for her new documentary, "Tillie Olsen: A Heart in Action."

A loving portrait of the San Francisco writer best known for "Tell Me a Riddle" - the poetic and wrenching 1961 novella about an old married couple facing the end of their hard lives - the film begins with the sound and image of Olsen's beating heart.

"What better way to open the film?" says Hershey, who specializes in documentaries about creative older women and made a prize-winning 1976 film about Bay Area photographer Imogen Cunningham. "It was perfect for Tillie. Her heart was in action all the time, whether it was for civil rights and justice or getting people writing and telling their stories."

Seven years in the making, "Tillie Olsen: A Heart in Action," will premiere locally at Oakland's Grand Lake Theater at 7 p.m. on Monday, Olsen's birthday. Before the screening, folksinger Ronnie Gilbert, an old friend and comrade of Olsen's, and members of Olsen's family will lead a sing-along of labor and folk songs like "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night" and "Which Side Are You On?" Gilbert will sing

"Beloved Comrade," as she does in the film when Olsen kisses her parents' gravestones. The lyrics will be projected on the screen for those in the crowd who don't know them.

"Tillie loved the Grand Lake, so when they said it was available on her birthday, I grabbed it," says Hershey, sitting in her small sixth-floor office at the Saul Zaentz Film Center in Berkeley.

One wall of the office is covered with pictures of Frida Kahlo, Walt Whitman, the Dalai Lama, and Olsen with novelist Alice Walker. In the film, Walker credits Olsen with "changing the landscape of feminist writing and reading," alluding to Olsen's role in getting the Feminist Press to republish forgotten works by women, among them Rebecca Harding Davis' 1861 "Life in the Iron Mills" and Agnes Smedley's 1929 "Daughter of Earth."

In the film, Olsen says she started writing about the lives of the working people she grew up with because "it was nearly impossible to find them in any of the books I read." While still in her teens, she began writing the novel "Yonnondio," which she took up again and published in the early '70s. In this Depression-era tale of a family struggling to survive, the mother, Anna, dies of a botched abortion she performs on herself.

Many women were forced to terminate their own pregnancies at the time, "and Tillie wanted to write about that. She was a woman writing about her life and her neighbors and her community," Hershey says. Like many women, the filmmaker discovered Olsen during what she calls "the resurgence of the feminist movement" in the '70s, when Olsen became a feminist heroine, a role she took to.

Olsen's work spoke to people "because she was telling our stories, our family stories, writing about our grandparents, their lives and struggles," says Hershey, who is in her 60s. Other writers were dealing with those subjects, she adds, "but there was something about Tillie's writing that was accessible to us, that made such sense and was so moving."

Tillie Lerner worked all kinds of jobs - waitress, laundress, pork trimmer in a packinghouse. She moved to San Francisco in 1934, and plunged into the local labor struggle, which she wrote about for the *New Republic* and *Partisan Review*. A member of the Young Communist League for a period, she fell in love with and

eventually married Jack Olsen, a fellow communist who was a warehouseman and union official (he later taught the first labor studies class at City College of San Francisco). He and Tillie, who had a daughter from a previous relationship, had three more daughters, all of whom became involved in social action.

During the dark days of the McCarthy era in the 1950s, Jack Olsen was continually fired for his political past and often out of work. Tillie, who was president of the PTA, was accused of being a Stalinist agent trying to infiltrate the schools; neighbors told their kids to shun the Olsen girls. Their mother worked as a secretary and at other jobs. She had little time for writing, a subject she explored in essays about impediments to writing that were published in her 1978 book, "Silences."

In 1955, on the basis of the short story "I Stand Here Ironing," about a single mother's pained relationship with her daughter, she scored a creative writing fellowship at Stanford. A Ford Foundation grant a few years later gave her time to write "Tell Me Riddle," which won the O. Henry Award for best short story in 1961.

"She caught the narrative flow right away and carried it off to a powerful, weeping ending," says Leo Litwak, the short-story writer and retired San Francisco State University professor. He didn't know Olsen but admires "Tell Me a Riddle" and "I Stand Here Ironing," the best-known pieces in Olsen's small body of work.

Labor historian and folklorist Archie Green, who did know Olsen well, says "she was as good as any writer who emerged from the radical movement at that time." But Green was turned off by what he saw as "an element of self-pity" in her later work and persona and didn't buy into the notion that "somehow the world or the system had conspired against her creativity and kept her from writing." Still, "Tillie was true to her culture and her class and she had talent."

Traveling with Olsen around the country, to workshops and readings at American University in Washington, D.C., and Louisiana State University, Hershey heard countless people tell the writer how much her stories had meant to them.

After the reading, "she'd stay, and a long line of people - of all ages, all ethnicities - would come up to her with old books in their hands, a torn copy of 'Tell Me a Riddle,'" recalls Hershey, who made this low-budget film with grants and hundreds of donations. She mixed interviews with Olsen, her family and writers with photographs and footage portraying the tumultuous times Olsen lived through:

czarist Cossacks, lynched men - Olsen tears up in the film as she recalls the sight and smell of a young African American she saw lynched and burned in Omaha - picketing longshoremen, marching Nazis, ravaged Hiroshima.

On the road, "Tillie didn't just sign a book. She wanted to talk to people, and it would be hours before the end of the line came," Hershey says. Olsen "looked you right in the eye and said, 'Tell me about yourself. What are you up to? Are you writing? You've gotta write, because it's your story.' "

Olsen wrote almost nothing of her own during the last 25 years of her life. She kept busy reading other people's manuscripts and writing blurbs, forewords and afterwords, says Hershey, who thinks Olsen was tired and "didn't have the energy to put into her own work anymore." But the writer remained politically engaged. She marched in anti-Iraq war demonstrations, and Hershey can still picture her tacking flyers onto telephone poles a year or so before she became ill.

Hershey became close with Olsen and her family in the early '70s after being introduced to her by the filmmaker's former partner, writer Sandy Boucher. They helped care for Olsen as she became more infirm, and developed Alzheimer's. In the film, Gloria Steinem comes to visit Olsen, who no longer recognizes her. Steinem takes a necklace from her neck and puts it around Olsen's. "I'm going to try and make some trouble today and do the work that you inspired us to do."

Olsen smiles at the camera and says, "That will be wonderful."

Tillie Olsen: A Heart in Action: Screens 7 p.m. Monday. Grand Lake Theater, 3200 Grand Lake Ave., Oakland. Tickets: \$10. Show includes a sing-along to labor and folk songs featuring Ronnie Gilbert. For information, call Persimmon Tree Films at (510) 222-6931 or go to www.thetillieolsenfilmproject.com.

E-mail filmmaker Ann Hershey: annhersh@aol.com.

Works republished: Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle" and her nonfiction book "Silences" have been republished by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, www.feministpress.org.

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